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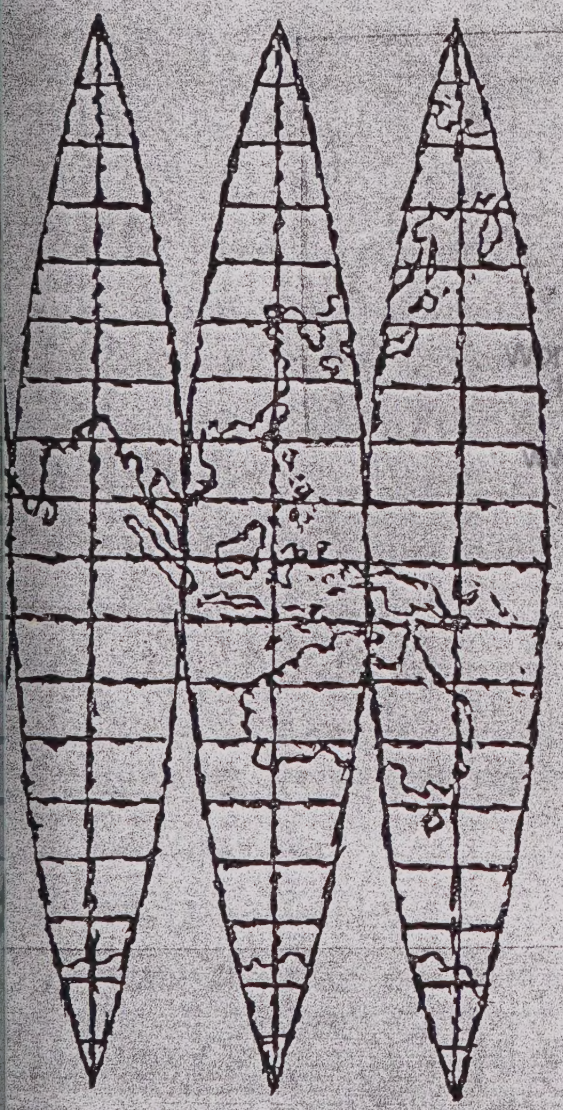
common christian responsibility toward areas of rapid social change



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THIS statement on The Common Christian Responsibility Toward Areas of Rapid Social Change *was prepared by the Working Committee of the Department on Church and Society (Division of Studies) of the World Council of Churches at its meeting, July 25-30, 1955, in Davos, Switzerland.*

In its statement the Committee emphasizes the need for an ecumenical study on this topic and makes specific recommendations concerning the issues which should be of special concern to the churches.

The Executive and Central Committees of the World Council of Churches examined these proposals and authorized the Department on Church and Society to undertake a study of these problems.

Geneva, Switzerland
September 1955.

THE COMMON CHRISTIAN RESPONSIBILITY TOWARD AREAS OF RAPID SOCIAL CHANGE

A Study of the Meaning of Responsible Emancipation

PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The Search for Foundations of Human Dignity

The peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America are in ferment; they have been awakened to a new sense of human dignity. They are in revolt against political and social conditions that deny human freedom and seek release from traditional customs and institutions that enslave. The urge to build new patterns of society, in which fundamental rights, economic welfare, and social well-being can be attained, is widespread. At its Lucknow meeting, the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, referring to the social revolution at work in Asia, said in its letter to the churches throughout the world:

> "The struggle for and the attainment of national independence, the break-up of the old village structure of society and the attempt to build up a society based on industrial techniques, the challenge to old customs and traditions through new conceptions of fundamental rights, the transformation in the status of women and the pattern of the family, all these indicate the vast dimension of the revolution."

In this process of social reconstruction the search for new moral and spiritual foundations is basic, and the Central Committee noted that "the Christian understanding of man is directly relevant to the search for new foundations for society".

The Unity of Mankind

The problems of areas of rapid social change in Asia, Africa and Latin America must be seen as world problems. The social awakening of these countries has come about through the impact of western technology, education and religion; and the way in which the West responds will help to determine whether this awakening will find its creative fulfilment in the development both of a better community life in Asia and Africa and of human solidarity. Whether for good or ill, we are one family under heaven. The new challenge facing peoples all

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over the world is to express " a concern for man and his needs wherever he lives ". As the Evanston Assembly stated :

> " World economic and social interdependence involves a new dimension in the task of creating a responsible society. "

The problems of bread, freedom and dignity for the large masses of people who are denied these can be faced only as *world* problems.

Of special concern is the contrast between prosperity and poverty in the world. Today, two-thirds of the world's population is living in conditions of poverty, disease and misery. The new realization that a better life is possible makes the disparity a question of moral injustice, and the economic and social well-being of these peoples comes as a fundamental moral challenge to the whole world. As Christians, we are " the servants of One Who speaks to us of the cup of water and daily bread ", and the Christian Gospel has a direct and fundamental relevance to this obligation of world community.

The World-Wide Christian Fellowship

There is a challenge to the churches all over the world in this situation. The churches in the lands of rapid social change have the task of making their witness to the Lordship of Christ over the world from within the revolutionary ferment. The responsibility of the churches in western lands is no less fundamental. It is in this context that the churches in every land can make use of the ecumenical movement " because it helps us to face the situation within a world-wide Christian fellowship. The fact that we are members one of another and confront these difficulties together, places new obligations on us all. " (Lucknow)

The churches and the ecumenical movement have become increasingly aware in recent years of the social implications of their faith and have stated on numerous occasions their concern for responsible society in a world perspective. Through missions, through programmes of inter-church aid, and work for international assistance and peace, the ecumenical movement has sought to give practical expression to this concern. However, there is today a further need for interpreting Christian concern in relation to particular social issues and problems. Therefore, the World Council is launching this study of the common Christian responsibility toward areas of rapid social change.

Aims and Scope of the Study

This study will have two aims :

First, to enable Christians and indigenous churches in Asia, Africa and Latin America to make a concerted study, under indigenous leadership, of the new social issues that challenge Christian social thought and action in their areas, in order to clarify the Christian responsibility for political, economic and social life. This involves the development of a social thought which is informed by the Christian faith and suited to a rapidly changing situation, and which will serve

as a guide to Christians and non-Christians. It also involves rethinking and altering the pattern of the Church's life and structure in the light of its social mission.

Second, to enable Christians and churches in the West to understand their responsibilities in the evolution of healthy political institutions, the development of economic welfare, and the building of a new community life in the lands of Asia, Africa and Latin America. This involves specifically understanding the economic implications of world community and the role of economic and technical aid from the West in the realization of social goals and spiritual values.

These two objectives of the study can best be achieved within the context of the ecumenical Christian fellowship. Within this fellowship people can overcome suspicion and search for the truth about social issues in an atmosphere of confidence and in a world perspective.

It is necessary to recognize that in many areas of the world, and especially in areas of rapid social change, the Church is numerically weak and is confronted by hostile ideologies, secularist forces, or dominant non-Christian religions. It therefore can have only limited influence on political and social developments. But the strength of the Church's witness in society arises out of the knowledge that the Gospel is mighty because it is true. The weakness of the Church's social witness throughout the world is due to the lack of this faith. Therefore the call to repentance and spiritual renewal is fundamental.

ISSUES AND TOPICS TO BE STUDIED

The processes of rapid social change in Asia, Africa and parts of Latin America are not only complex, but they vary from country to country and region to region. The churches of the different areas must give attention to their own particular problems. However, in an ecumenical study, as envisaged here, it will be necessary to limit the enquiry to selected issues of common concern.

Among the key issues in these lands is the movement for emancipation from oppressive political and economic systems as well as social and religious structures. A new sense of the dignity of the individual, and with it the urge for a new status in society, the changing status of women, new parent-child relations, educational progress, the increased mobility of labour, and urbanization, are some features of this movement of emancipation. At the same time, the release from the restraints of traditional social customs and moral codes leads to social and individual irresponsibility and demoralization. Men and women suddenly find themselves without cultural roots. In such areas, therefore, not only creative, but also destructive, possibilities are present, often complicated by the pressures of a rapidly growing population and by racial tensions. It is the task of the churches to help channel the forces of change in the direction of new and healthy patterns of community life. In other words, it is the duty of the Church to work for *responsible emancipation*. This demands a concern for the freedom and the

dignity of the human personality and for the development of societies where man can find cultural and religious fulfilment. It also involves the evolution of a critical and realistic humanism based on a Christian understanding of man and of Christ's Lordship over the world.

The Working Committee of the Department on Church and Society recommends four main fields of study and action by the World Council of Churches and by all churches and Christians.

Responsible Citizenship

The emancipation which seeks for self-government and the emergence of national states and democratic forms of political life puts a new responsibility on the churches and Christians. Some of the issues which need study are: the meaning of the secular state; the role of democratic institutions and political parties in the changing situation; the theological and practical basis of cooperation between Christians and non-Christians and secular groups in efforts to improve economic and social conditions; the part that governmental and private initiative have to play, and their responsibility for the improvement of economic and social structures.

Village and Rural Life

Under the impact of modern economic and social forces, the patterns of the family, of rural community, of village economic structure, and of land tenure are changing and need direction. These issues are particularly urgent in densely populated areas. There must also be study of the role and the responsibility of the churches, the local congregation and of individual Christians in the rebuilding of rural life. In this regard the distinctive and common contributions of Church, society and state need to be defined.

The Problems of Urbanization

Urbanization and industrialization are producing changes at a rapid rate in many areas. People migrating to the towns often become completely divorced from their traditional social and cultural ties. This threatens the very basis of family life and of the local congregation. Problems of health, housing, education and morality become exceedingly acute. The attitude of man to his work changes completely as a result of industrial development, and the struggle for social security and status creates conflicts between organized groups. The moral degradation of all classes of society is a serious problem in most cities, and is especially aggravated in areas of rapid social change. Businessmen, labour unions, local political and other groups need help in developing responsible social and economic relations and a healthy community. In this struggle, the churches have a difficult task because of their weakness and because in these areas industrialization is more often than not unrelated to social goals and human values.

The Impact of Foreign Enterprise and International Assistance

The impact of private trade and enterprise, technical aid and economic assistance from the highly industrialized nations on the political, social and cultural life of the economically underdeveloped nations of the world needs critical study and evaluation in the light of social well-being and responsible emancipation. It is necessary to develop the right strategy and the right forms of enterprise and assistance conducive to healthy economic, political and social goals in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

It is apparent from the nature of these topics that only a study which is truly ecumenical can meet the needs of these areas. Many of these problems are not unknown in other parts of the world. What makes them so vital here is the tremendous rapidity of change, the avalanche of influences threatening and sweeping away old forms of life. In this ecumenical concern, the churches in Asia, Africa and Latin America must take leadership. But all churches must participate, and by learning about one another's experiences their own situations will be seen in a new light, in a sharper perspective.

A PLAN OF ACTION

This will be a three-year study, and churches, missions and national groups will be kept informed of its purpose, scope and development.

Study will be promoted in specified areas through consultations and conferences at the local and regional levels. The Working Committee of the Department will review the progress of this study and hopes to hold enlarged meetings on a continental and world-wide basis.

In a number of countries studies by groups and churches related to these topics are already under way. These efforts need stimulation and coordination to be more fruitful. Through the study these groups can learn from one another, and receive the support and the corrective of the wider Christian fellowship. To be significant this study should be related to the convictions of local and national Christian opinion. It will also provide a clearing house of information on ideas, decisions and actions in various areas, and promote close cooperation with governmental, lay and non-Christian thinking and action in this field.

All interested persons are cordially invited to send comments or enquiries on this study to the Secretary of the Department of Church and Society.

Copies of this statement, either singly or in bulk, may be had on request.

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